



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Why the Erasure of History Matters

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** History and historiography matter. As Winston Churchill astutely said, “Everyone can recognize history when it happens. Everyone can recognize history after it has happened; but only the wise man knows at the moment what is vital and permanent, what is lasting and memorable.” Today, such sensitivity to the value of history is evaporating from the public consciousness. The willful blindness to the instructional value of the past is manifesting itself in attempts to erase history rather than reckon with it responsibly.

At a time when statues and monuments are being destroyed in an attempt to rewrite history and create new narratives, it is critical to understand the importance of history and historiography. It is the only method by which to understand how we got to our current period. The late historian Yosef Yerushalmi, in his seminal study *Zakhor* (literary Hebrew for “to remember”), wrote,

The historian does not simply come in to replenish the gaps of memory; he constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact. Moreover, in common with historians in all fields of inquiry, he seeks ultimately to recover a total past—in this case the entire Jewish past—even if he is directly concerned with only a segment of it. No subject is potentially unworthy of his interest, no document or artifact beneath his attention.

Radicals who are uncomfortable with history do not follow Yerushalmi’s guidelines or, indeed, any other historical norms. Today’s protesters are not interested in facts but in feelings and opinions, which afford them a greater sense of both comfort and control.

If one is to understand the present, one has to document the historical periods that preceded it. Samuel Kassow’s critical book, incisively titled [\*Who Will Write Our\*](#)

[History?](#) tells the story of historian Emanuel Ringelblum and the creation of the Oyneg Shabes Archive. Under desperate circumstances, Ringelblum documented Jewish life in Warsaw as the Final Solution was being implemented and captured a picture of a Jewish community on the verge of destruction. Ringelblum was committed to ensuring that the events that unfolded in Nazi-occupied Europe would have a Jewish observer and that future generations would have Jewish documents to study rather than solely Polish ones. As Kassow explained, Ringelblum's mission was to use history to defend Jewish honor and combat antisemitism. As Kassow put it in the conclusion to his study, Ringelblum's message was that a fuller and better documented history would demonstrate to posterity that "Jews were not just victims; they were people and part of a living resilient nation."

Much like Jewish civilization, the consciousness of Western civilization is rooted in its ability to safeguard the historical values that allowed for its evolution. Today, historical awareness is rapidly fading. There is a rapidly growing disdain for historical understanding, made visible in the swift rise of "cancel culture." So prevalent among the younger generation, "cancel culture" is motivated in part by the belief that history was invented for the benefit of the powerful and partly by the notion that historical sins are passed down to succeeding generations who must then expiate those sins via political action. Key ingredients of Western civilization, above all nationalism, are automatically rejected, including by members of the progressive political class like New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Historical revisionism extends this trend into the realm of historical denial. More to the point, it is the codification of the art of bullshit, as philosopher Harry Frankfurt put it:

For the bullshitter...all these bets are off: He is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.

In the age of infotainment, the danger is that entertainment will completely rewrite both reality and history. Even more dangerously, social media has allowed "history" to be boiled down to a tweet or an Instagram post, leaving room for false assumptions and misinformation to spread at great speed. This is particularly effective in the US, where the general public has a marked lack of knowledge about their own nation's history and politics.

Historically, American politics have long tended toward the center, but identity politics, Trump's excesses, overreactions to Trump, and the rise of socialists may have short-circuited that corrective impulse. To many Democrats, nations and

nationalism are increasingly anathema. The idea of a people with sovereignty defies the fluid, borderless world they wish to see. Antipathy toward traditional religion is similarly expressed.

Protests may indeed be democratic, but do the actors really grasp what they are protesting for or against? As in politics, students (and their professors) who take an active part in these events need to get beyond the bull and begin to appreciate the complexity and imperfections of American democracy.

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